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ABSTRACT

This study focused on how student activists' perceptions of institutional culture affect the nature and extent of their behaviors. Student activism was defined as more than just organizational involvement; instead, it implied involvement in and commitment to social change or social justice. Interviews were conducted with 26 student activists at a large public university. Student activists perceived the university to be operating within a political framework in a number of instances. Their perceptions of campus culture affected the ways they chose to participate. Students who viewed the campus culture as political were apt to attempt to form coalitions to "force" change. Those who saw the campus culture as bureaucratic were likely to seek formal positions to become a part of change. Students who saw the campus culture as primarily collegial trusted others to engage in dialogue, and those who say the culture as rational attempted to present reasonable arguments for change. Students' perceptions of campus culture depended on individual situations and individual arbiters of the culture. In this research, students seemed to believe that the most powerful arbiters were administrators. (Contains 25 references.) (SLD)

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Student activists in higher education:
Exploring the relationships between perceptions of culture and change strategies

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Student activists in higher education:

Exploring the relationships between perceptions of culture and change strategies

Let me tell you this: What I say doesn't mean anything. You never know, because it is like you are in this dark closet. You never see what is going on behind the closed [door]. - Keith

When Keith, a student activist in our study, used these words to describe his inability to know what went on in every facet of the university, he was attempting to convey his perception of a particular aspect of campus culture. With his story, he indicated that he felt shut out of organizational decision-making, and that key administrators did not take his views seriously. Keith's response to this perception was to find forums within and outside of the university where his voice was heard, and where his critiques of university practices and larger social issues could be made public, rather than silenced. For example, he became active in a progressive student organization on campus, wrote columns in the student newspaper, and expressed his dissent on a variety of topics at open campus forums. While Keith's story was not the only one we heard in our interviews with twenty-six student activists at a research university, it was a powerful narrative about the ways in which student activists might perceive campus culture. Further, it was illustrative of the ways in which those perceptions could influence actions. As one piece of a larger study focusing on student activism, this paper focuses on how student activists' perceptions of institutional culture affect the nature and extent of their behaviors. As such, it expands understandings of students' work toward social change.

Culture in Higher Education

Culture is a concept that has deep roots in sociology and anthropology (Behar, 1996; Geertz, 1973; Richardson, 1997). While often elusive, its component parts have fueled understandings of the communities that we study and in which we live. In higher education, scholars have examined academic cultures, student cultures, and administrative cultures, in addition to campus cultures in general. The sum of this research has taught us that culture has multiple facets and levels, all of which can be perceived in different ways by different individuals and groups.

In this paper, several key articles about culture in higher education guided our approach. First, in 1988, William Tierney posited a conceptual framework of organizational culture that proposed six essential parts of the analysis of culture in higher education. Specifically, he asserted that in such an analysis, the following components should be considered: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. Tierney's work helped us to identify the various facets of culture that would likely be important components to consider in understanding student activists' perceptions of their campus environments. It also helped us to understand the important potential benefits of a cultural analysis, in that "studying the cultural dynamics of educational institutions and systems equips

us to understand and, hopefully, reduce adversarial relationships. Equally important, it enable[s] us to recognize how those actions and shared goals are most likely to succeed and how they can best be implemented" (p. 5). Tierney's analysis further suggested that, "The culture of an organization is grounded in the shared assumptions of individuals participating in the organization. Often taken for granted by the actors themselves, these assumptions can be identified through stories, special language, norms, institutional ideology, and attitudes that emerge from individual and organizational behavior" (p. 4). Because the stories we heard from student activists suggested conflicting, rather than uniform or shared, stories about the institution, we turned to other scholarship to enhance our understandings of the role of conflict as an element in culture.

Michael Kramer and Julie Berman (2001) suggested that culture is not merely a set of uniform, cohesive beliefs and behaviors of all those within an organization. Instead, drawing on Martin (1992) and Meyerson and Martin (1987), they noted that a given culture can be more fully understood by analyzing it as integrated, differentiated, and fragmented.

> An integrated perspective examines beliefs and values that are common to all organizational members, a view typical of early research. A differentiated perspective considers beliefs and values of the subcultures that exist and which may contrast or conflict with those of other subcultures or with the general organizational culture. A fragmented perspective considers organizational members' views to be ever changing with few shared understandings (Kramer & Berman, 2001, p. 298).

Kramer and Berman emphasized that a cultural analysis need not emphasize a unitary understanding of an organization's culture. Instead, acknowledging the extent to which all three of these cultural threads co-exist in an institution provides a more thorough understanding of that institution or community. Kramer and Berman's work helped us to look not only for a unitary story among all student activists, but also for the complex and, perhaps, contradictory stories that they told us.

Finally, John Smart, George Kuh, and William Tierney (1997) analyzed the organizational effectiveness in two-year colleges as it relates to institutional culture and decision-making. Drawing on Cameron and Ettington's (1988) work, they posed that culture can be understood in four idealized types: clan (emphasizing inclusivity and affiliation among organizational members), adhocracy (emphasizes the inevitability of change and necessity of responsiveness in decision making), bureaucratic (emphasizing stability and consistency), and market (emphasizing planning and achievement). Smart, Kuh, and Tierney found in their study that, according to administrators' perceptions of culture, rational/collegial decision processes (often associated with clan and adhocracy cultures) tend to be more effective in decisions related to resource allocation. Conversely,

autocratic/political processes (associated with bureaucracy and market cultures) lead to decision making in which "special interest groups influence decisions as much as institutional priorities" (p. 272). This research asserts the importance of culture in higher education, especially as it related to effectiveness around institutional goals. From this work, we were reminded, "How one thinks about organizational life also suggests the manner in which strategy gets enacted and defined" (p. 258). While this article was largely based on administrators' perceptions of culture, we wanted to explore students' perceptions as well.

Student Activism and Change

The literature on student activism indicates that interaction and communication between students and other university participants is often strained (Altbach, 1999; Boren, 2001; Rhoads, 1998a, 1998b). Throughout history, college students in the United States have been seen as children in need of protection and care (as in the era of *in loco parentis*), as well as adults who are entirely responsible for their educational experiences. While students are characterized in many ways, that characterization, offers one indicator of the type of culture at a given institution.

Over time the nature of student activism has changed. Still, activists' choices of strategies have related to what they view as effective within a given culture, as they perceive it. That culture is not necessarily the one that others in a university environment may describe on promotional material. While student activists' perceptions are not necessarily "accurate" in the sense that they convey every element of reality in university culture or function, they are nevertheless important. These perceptions influence student activists' choice of actions, both in terms of direction or focus and strategy. For example, students will respond to a perceived bureaucracy in a way meant either to gain credence within that bureaucracy, to strengthen that bureaucracy, to demonstrate the flaws in that bureaucracy, or to be unnoticed by that bureaucracy. Their observations and interpretations of campus culture influence their ability and willingness to both support and disrupt university functioning.

Decisions in higher education institutions tend to be made through hierarchical structures that privilege administrators and, in a different way, faculty members. Indeed, college students who desire to deliberately change their institutional and social environments – often called student activists – have been characterized as a "nuisance" or "detrimental to campus order and tranquility" (Astin, 1993, p. 48). However, they have also promoted major changes to higher education institutions that many would see as positive (Rhoads, 1998a). It is the intent of this research to better understand the relationships between cultural perceptions and action among a group of individuals who are influential in making change on campus, whether interpreted positively or negatively.

Conceptual Framework

This paper defines student activism as involvement in and commitment to social change or social justice. Social justice and social change are inherently connected as "working toward social justice requires changing unjust institutional structures, policies, and practices and challenging the dominant ideology" (Goodman, 2001, p. 4-5). Theories suggesting what can be considered socially just derive from a variety of disciplines, but are firmly grounded in the early writings of political philosophers (Miller, 1999). The concept of "social justice" depends on the existence of three qualities: 1) those affected inhabit a common society in which advantages and disadvantages are distributed; 2) social justice is linked to institutions within that common society; and 3) institutional structures are able to be changed (Miller, 1999, p. 5-6). Higher education, as an important social institution, is directly related to social justice in that it prepares people for increased roles in decision-making and helps to provide them with resources to distribute at will, thereby enabling them to become agents of change if they so desire.

This research will draw on and expand current scholarship on change processes in higher education as they relate to campus culture. Much scholarship has focused on leadership and change at upper administrative levels (Bensimon & Neumann, 1992; Birnbaum, 1999, 2000; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; Chaffee & Tierney, 1988). Recent work has investigated how institutional culture affects change strategies (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Still, this work acknowledges only minimally the role that students play in change processes, and fails to note the strategies that they use in promoting institutional change. We assert that student activists have an important role to play in change processes in universities and, ultimately, in the larger society. However, we do not know how their perceptions of culture influence their choices and strategies in relation to that change. It is on that question that this paper is focused.

The cultural framework that we use to understand this data is outlined in George Kuh's (1989) chapter on *Organizational concepts and influence*. In this work, he posed four "conventional" models of understanding organizations and cultures, and discusses how they relate to working with students in higher education settings. As Kuh described them, these four models are: rational, bureaucratic, collegial, and political. Organizations that are governed by rational models tend to be focused on reason and logic, but often fail to fully understand the complex nature of higher education. Organizations that are primarily bureaucratic have clearly defined roles for all participants and emphasize productivity and efficiency. However, bureaucracies are resistant to change and cannot always account for the diverse experiences that are present in higher education. Organizations that emphasize collegial relationships are largely based on democratic principles that ensure representation

of all stakeholders. Still, these organizations tend to be inefficient and do not always recognize the role that power differentials (formed through relationships) play in decision-making. Finally, organizations that are largely governed by a political model acknowledge conflict as potentially productive in the organization and encourage diverse involvement to reach decisions. However, these organizations also tend to reinforce current power relations and link those relations to decision-making and resource allocation (Kuh). In this work, we were interested in using this framework to better understand how student activists perceived culture and how those perceptions influenced their actions.

Also important to note in this work is that student activists' perceptions of campus culture were not reserved to one particular aspect of culture, although the participants often spoke most passionately about their perceptions of administrators as representatives of a particular aspect of campus culture. Still, participants viewed other students, faculty, and larger societal influences as a part of the overall campus culture.

Methods

The team for this project consists of four researchers in Higher Education and Communication. Each researcher has extensive experience with students, either as a faculty member, academic staff member, a student affairs professional or some combination of these. For the purposes of this study, we first defined student activism in the following way: Student activism is more than just organizational involvement; instead, it implies involvement in and commitment to social change or social justice. Our first task, then, was finding students who met our definition. Then, based on initial interviews with students who we had identified, we found other student activists through a snowball sampling technique or through our continued identification of such students through newspaper articles or other sources. A member from the research team contacted each student activist and arranged for individual interviews. All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. The initial open-ended interview protocol was revised several times throughout the interviewing process as we attempted to ensure that the wording used was closely related to our research questions as well as easily understandable to our participants. Participants were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire in addition to signing an informed consent form prior to beginning the interview.

In 2002-2003, a total of twenty-six interviews were conducted at one large public university. Each of the interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two hours. Within this university, our participants were members of a wide variety of organizational affiliations. Of these twenty-six individuals, 20 were women and 6 were men. Eighteen identified as White, two identified as Black, two identified as Hispanic, one identified as multi-racial, and three constructed their own racial category or elected not

to respond. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 25. They were enrolled in twenty different academic majors and affiliated with five different political parties.

Each researcher transcribed her interviews and then forwarded copies to team members. To analyze data for this particular analysis, two members of the research team independently coded the data. Then, they came together to compare their coding decisions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). After renegotiation on every point of disagreement, they came to consensus about the appropriate codes for each piece of data. It should be noted that we initially attempted to code the data in relation to Tierney's model for analyzing culture. However, we found that model to be a poor fit for our data. As such, we instead elected to adopt the model that Kuh (1989) discussed in his article on organizational culture in student affairs. In this way, we analyzed how student activists viewed institutional cultures, and how they believed that culture influenced their behaviors.

Findings

Student activists understood the culture of their institution in ways that aligned with the framework discussed above. However, it is important to note that while we divide these sections to emphasize the ways in which student activists perceived institutional culture, we also recognize that their analyses of that culture are often complex and situation-dependent. As such, these assessments are not static images of the university. Instead, they can be and often are changed.

Perceptions of a political cultural view

Student activists in the study perceived the university administration to be operating within a political framework in a number of instances. The political model emphasizes "the importance of power, influence, and conflict resolution" and power is typically associated with the "ability to control resources and to influence the development of institutional policy" (Ambler, 2000, p. 123). Conflict is inevitable in the political model due to differing opinions, limited resources, personality differences, and "uneven power distribution" (Kuh, 1989, p. 218-219). In the examples below, Atalanta and Ayn were fully aware of the power students have and use it to advance their causes. The experiences and statements of these two activists reveal how power, political beliefs, conflict, and limited resources can be interpreted using a political framework.

In this example Atalanta attempted to lobby the university administration to position a particular student resource in a certain location on campus. Atalanta explained:

> When we had a meeting with [the person in charge] about it, he told us it couldn't happen. So as students we got together and we made a petition and we did a little research and decided that there is no reason why it shouldn't happen unless they are not telling us something. So, we had a meeting with [the person in charge] and we got a lot of people in there and I think it came off

> as he was just waiting to see if the students actually cared enough for him to do this, because otherwise "we had other plans for that building." And it was as if we were marginalized… And either he didn't know his information or he was lying to us but either way that just emphasized how he didn't, he either didn't really care or he was wanting to push us off… I'm glad that we got together at that point and decided to do something because the group of us all felt that we were being pushed off. It was pretty obvious.

In this statement, Atalanta revealed her perception of the administration as functioning in a political culture. She conveyed feelings of being marginalized and explained that those feelings empowered her to join and organize a group of other activists to capture the attention of the administration. When asked in the interview what roles administrators had played in her activism, Atalanta told us:

> Well in general I want to say that they are seen as the enemy. They are in control of the situation that activists don't approve of. Therefore they are seen as responsible…but one of the things about the people in power…is that they are not going to educate you about what goes on. I think that if administrators were more honest with student activists…there could be a little more understanding.

Atalanta considered the administration to be operating in a political culture; she viewed the administration as an adversary, having the larger portion of power and formal authority to control decisions that effect students. She believed administrators could be more effective in making institutional decisions by educating students on issues and giving more consideration to the student voice. So, she used strategies such as petitions and student prompted meetings with administrators to strengthen the influential power of students.

Ayn, a student activist working to increase involvement among her peers in formal political processes, gave her view of the university and administration as a political culture. Ayn explained:

> I've noticed that you kind of have to play political games. It's really hard to get in from the outside. So you have to go on the inside, and work that way, like into government and things of that nature…. There's a big lack of willingness to participate in proactive things. At [this University], it's just very, very hard to get people to participate in what you're trying to do. My former tactic for doing this was just advertisement in general. I'd put up signs and sit in free speech alley to try to get people to come to [political] meetings. From there, in the beginning of the semester, when we had good attendance, we tried to support a campaign for judge. And there was no participation. It was very disheartening. I think that the ways that I have been successful has been acquiring leadership positions, which makes my voice louder, and different

> people listen, like administrators, and things of that nature. And then it's more direct because I haven't found a wide backing.

Ayn was aware that voice is import in a political culture and to advance any issue or cause there must be enough power for change. Ayn conveyed her frustration of not being able to garner a sufficient population to move her cause forward. She explained that she has adjusted her strategy away from an awareness approach to a more direct approach of obtaining support of leaders who may have a stronger voice in influencing political change.

Kuh (1989) explained that, "the political model acknowledges the uneven distribution of power within increasingly pluralistic colleges and universities" (p. 219). Atalanta's and Ayn's perceptions demonstrated how power relations both formal and informal converge and operate in the decision making process within the university. Atalanta recognized the formal power of the administration to control the location of student resources and her own power to organize, lobby, and influence the administration's decisions. Similarly, Ayn realized that power and leadership influence are important aspects of the political model in working toward social justice. Ayn modified her strategies and behaviors to align with the political model to find similarly-minded individuals and administrators who could join with her in working toward social change.

Perceptions of a bureaucratic culture

In the bureaucratic culture, organizational structure, hierarchies, position authority, and standardization are common characteristics (Kuh, 1989, p. 215-218). The bureaucratic culture also "seeks stability; its strategic orientation is to maintain the status quo. Formally described roles dictate the activities performed by various individuals and the nature of relations among people; individual compliance with organizational mandates is governed by rules and regulations" (Smart, Kuh, and Tierney, 1997, p. 262). Joe described his perceptions of the bureaucratic culture in the university in this way:

> You can't always get what you want by burning down buildings and blitzkrieging everything basically. Sometimes you have to stick within the rules. Sometimes in dealing with the administration that is the only way they will listen to you. And basically you attract more flies with honey than vinegar.... Now there are times where the rules themselves are not worthy to be upheld... But if the system exists and the system isn't corrupt and the system can allow you to come to a certain end then why not work within it?... You can't be a yes man, but you can work within the system. That's the important thing.

In this example, Joe verbalized the quintessence of the bureaucratic culture. The

bureaucratic model recognizes formal authority, systems, and rules and the value of working within the organizational structure for effectiveness and change. Joe believed student activists can be effective by working within the "system" that is in place to make progress and to accomplish objectives.

Christine viewed campus culture and, particularly, the administration as a bureaucracy as well. She explained how she became involved as a student activist and gives her perception of the university system and administrators.

> When I first got involved in stuff my freshman and sophomore year, I would hear about the administration making decisions, and I wouldn't really know, I would know the name of the person making the decision, and whatever their decision was, I would kind of base my opinion of them off of that because I really didn't have a whole lot of interaction with them, and even now I don't interact with them a whole, whole lot.

Christine recognized the position authority that administrators have and she based her opinions of administrators solely on institutional decisions they make within their formal hierarchical role in the bureaucratic structure. Christine stated she does not have much contact with them and her strategies as a student activist are based on what she hears about "the bureaucrats" and their decisions.

Joe and Christine conveyed their view of the university as a bureaucracy. They recognized the hierarchical system and formalized roles and structures that exist. Their strategies involved approaching the university, not necessarily through forming collegial relationships with individuals within the organization, but understanding and navigating "the system."

Perceptions of a Collegial Culture

Very few activists described occasions that they perceived to be collegial. Kuh (1989) describes a collegial culture to be one where "participants are open to new ideas, share and clarify their positions through discussion, and change their positions when presented with compelling reasons to do so" (p. 217). Rose described a collegial culture in her interactions with administrators. She stated, "[administrators] know all of us, they support all of our functions and stuff, so I mean I can call them and they know who I am." Rose's comments indicated that she perceived the interactions between administrators and herself to be collegial. She felt that there was support for the activities sponsored by her organization.

As we learned in this research, sharing ideas is a big part of student activism. This sharing of knowledge can help others to understand their position on specific issues. Some students' perceptions of the culture did not pertain just to their interactions with administrators. For instance, Laura explained how she would approach a particular situation in working or communicating with others. When discussing her desire to help to educate herself and others, she stated, "if you're informed

yourself, then you're more likely in just normal conversations with people to correct them, or it just shows when you talk. I think that changes stuff." It is important to notice that she is not specifically referring to administrators in this instance, but rather to anyone in the campus community. Her perceptions of a collegial culture would make open communication and collegial exchanges of ideas between students as well as others possible. Lynn described a collegial approach this way, "I'm just there to educate people and if you don't want to listen to me that's fine but I'd much rather just sit down and talk to you calmly than scream at you across the street from somewhere else." Again, this quote emphasizes student activists' desire to share ideas with others in the university. By having open exchanges of ideas, activists can communicate their issues to administrators and other students.

Both Laura and Lynn emphasized how a collegial culture would be supportive of sharing ideas with students and administrators. Kuh (1989) discussed the importance of dialogue in a collegial culture. Thus, these activists' descriptions imply that they perceived a collegial culture where they were at least occasionally able to share ideas by discussing their views with others. Open exchanges with students and administrators allow a consensus to be reached through education and understanding.

Perceptions of a Rational Culture

Student activists perceived the administration to operate using the rational model on several occasions. A rational culture demonstrates "fairness and objectivity in decision making, deliberate and purposeful action, and predictable outcomes" (Kuh, 1989, p. 214). In working to obtain a new home for a particular student resource, Katie described this rational approach:

> We worked for a week about that meeting [with a key administrator], getting everything in order, thinking about all possible questions that were going to be asked, and how we were going to handle it, and who was going to handle it, or what we were going to do about it.

This comment implies that the activists perceived that campus decision-makers would use the information provided by the activists to support their decisions. Therefore, activists' tried to present information that they thought was important in the decision making process.

Ann's approach to an environmental effort on campus demonstrates her perception of the presence of a rational culture.

> I studied and taught myself and learned about how waste leaves campus and what happens to it in the process and who's in charge of it. I learned the contract and I learned the people's names and I talked to the people at the recycling plant and I talked to the people that service it. And then [I] wrote a proposal to the [administrator] on why [the university] should be recycling and how if it is done correctly a recycling program pays for itself because it's cheaper to recycle than it is to landfill.

Ann researched the subject and developed a plan that could be presented to administration. The process adopted by Ann demonstrates her belief that decisions made by the administration are based on a logical process. Since she held the belief that a rational culture exists, she used an approach involving information gathering and planning of a compelling argument to be effective in working with the administration.

Lynn also perceived a rational culture within the university. She stated, "I mean administration needs to be informed.... We have everything laid out for them. We have a web site you can go to." Lynn implied that by having relevant information available for administration, university decision-makers would be able to make decisions based on analysis.

Katie, Ann, and Lynn all demonstrated activist approaches that would be effective in a rational culture. By gathering and analyzing the information that was pertinent to their project, they could present administration with a plan. As Kuh (1989) points out, the rational model "appeals to reason and logic" (p. 214). These activists had goals and devised reasonable plans in order to accomplish their goals.

Instances were student activists perceive mixed cultures

Student activists in the study at times perceived the university or administration to be operating with mixed cultures. For instance, Laura recognized that a hierarchy or bureaucratic culture exists but at the same times she perceived a political culture in which student activists can effect change. She stated:

> To me, the most important thing to realize is that there are levels of power and administrators have a certain kind of power, but students have a different kind of power...you have to know how to use both of them. And I think a lot of people don't realize that the power that the administration has is really the all-encompassing kind of power. Students can work without the system to pressure for change, and if everybody is pressuring for change then the system has to follow.

Laura's interview statements reveal that she perceived the university to operate in a mixed bureaucratic and political culture. She believed there are times where student activists can work within the bureaucratic system to accomplish their objectives and there are other times when student activists must work outside of the system and force change through political organization of the students.

Keith, a student activist working to get a recycling program on campus, gave us another example of a how student activists may perceive a mixed political and bureaucratic culture. He stated:

> We figured that it would be feasible for [the university] to recycle 30%.... So we thought [the university] could save $67,000 a year. And we presented this to them... But that is not what

> [the university] is about…[The university] is about keeping everything like it is… And until anyone complains we just let it roll…Now what we have decided to do is to basically short circuit the administration. Like in football a hail Mary pass over their heads. And to directly fund it through a student fee. Students will pay for it….and we are saying that in 2 years hopefully we will have the initial cost paid… Now there is the question of course will they actually veto, because the administration holds power to veto…especially fees. So, we will be very interested to see if they do that. But this is power because this is putting them on the spot…Activism is like judo…The administration is this big lumbering giant. We are faster than them. We look at recycling and we kind of throw something at them that they don't want to throw back. Oh, okay we'll sign it cause it's embarrassing.

As Laura and Keith's experiences convey, there are times when student activists perceive a university culture as both political and bureaucratic. This occurs when there are contraventions between administrative values and student activist priorities or values. Student activists in these examples were aware of the bureaucratic power structures that they must work with, in, or against and the power of their own ability to promote change.

Activists also showed a combined collegial and rational perception of the culture of the university in relation to a project involving the location of the student resource described above. Katie described the sharing of ideas as well as designing a plan in relation to the university's Master Plan. She stated:

> So we met weekly, and we discussed the issues that we had, specifically with the people who were running the [center]—the [administrator] and the [person in charge] at the time about what we could do to change it. We started, we really started working with the strategic plan that we had been given. Before, we had always, the year before, we had worked on the strategic plan with the [person in charge], and it was pretty much our strategic plan…. So, we talked about everything that we thought was wrong. We talked about how it could be changed and we came up with new timelines for things, and marked the things that were more important than the others.

Her perception of the culture as collegial led her to discuss the issues with the administrators who were involved. But, Katie also demonstrated the perception of a rational culture in her planning efforts. By using a combined approach with the administration, it was more likely that positive goal consensus among administrators and student activists could be achieved.

As all of these examples demonstrate, student activists in this study did not perceive the university culture to be monolithic. Instead, several acknowledged that cultural norms and,

correspondingly, "effective" actions were situationally dependent. There is no single culture that could describe every aspect of this university. Student activists had multiple perceptions of the university and tailored their approaches to the administration accordingly. Further, the recognition of the presence of different cultures simultaneously allowed student activists to implement more than one method to meet their goals.

Conclusion

In this paper, we attempted to better understand how students who were interested and engaged in the functioning of the university understood the institutional culture in which their efforts were embedded. We also wanted to know how those cultural perceptions affected their actions. We learned that perceptions of culture affect decisions in multiple ways. As Tierney (1988) explained, "No matter how much information we gather, we can often choose from several viable alternatives. Culture influences the decision" (p. 5). Students' perceptions of campus culture affect the ways that they will choose to participate on campus. To the extent that students view campus as primarily political, they may attempt to form coalitions with others to "force" change. To the extent that they view campus culture as bureaucratic, they may seek formal positions (such as in student government) to become a part of the change. If students perceive the campus to be primarily collegial, they will trust others to be engaged with them in open dialogue. If they perceive campus as primarily rational, they will attempt to present arguments that will appear reasonable and compelling in initiating change. At the same time, we learned that students' perceptions of their campus cultures are both dependent on individual situations and individual arbiters of that culture. In this research, students seemed to believe that the most powerful arbiters were administrators.

Throughout history, student activists have challenged core behaviors of the university, to include the curriculum, admissions, as well as various aspects of living conditions. They are well positioned to articulate their views of culture since, "Only when we break these codes and conventions [in culture] are we forcibly reminded of their presence and considerable power" (Tierney, 1988, p. 4). Student activists regularly break the codes that structure their lives in universities, and clearly have the potential to make positive and negative differences on college campuses. It is imperative that those in higher education who are charged with leading and improving their institutions understand how student activists' perceptions of institutional culture can affect their subsequent behavior. We hope that this research will provide insights to administrators, faculty members, students, and others who are interested in the processes of social change.

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